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ABSTRACT

A literature-based rationale for teaching American Sign Language (ASL) as the primary language system for deaf children elaborates on the following points: Sign languages are visual-manual; spoken languages are oral-aural. Competency in a first language tremendously increases a person's ability to learn a second language. Deaf children have not been able to compete academically with their hearing, English-speaking peers. Deaf children of deaf parents perform better academically than deaf children of hearing parents. About 90% of deaf adults marry other deaf adults. Artificial sign systems that are currently used deny deaf children the opportunity to create and experiment with language naturally. The use of simultaneous communication (such as SEE 2 and spoken English) in the classroom does not mean that deaf students are receiving "exact" English. Without exposure to ASL, deaf students still develop ASL-like habits. ASL is a natural language. Culture and language are inseparable, and denying access to ASL is denying deaf culture. It is concluded that English literacy is a desirable quality and should also be included as a component of a total communication philosophy using a bilingual/bicultural approach; problems in attaining this goal are outlined. (JDD)

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TEN REASONS FOR ALLOWING DEAF CHILDREN EXPOSURE TO

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AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

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Few deaf children in America today are even aware that there exists a native American Sign Language (ASL) full of heritage, history, and rich with a kinesthetic beauty unparalleled by artificial sign systems. Deaf children remain in this linguistic darkness because 90% of their educators are hearing, many of whom refuse to embrace the substantiated reality that all attempts to develop English literate deaf children have proven inadequate. I encourage parents, educators, and administrators to review the history of the education of the deaf and consider if it is not time to, once again, allow deaf children to learn ASL. Though there are more than ten, please consider the following reasons:

1. Sign languages are visual-manual; spoken languages are oral-aural. English is linear and depends on morphological manipulations. The word "happy" is negated by the affix "un" or transforms into a noun with the suffix "ness". English is dependent upon stringing words out consecutively in a well defined order. English is constrained to this process because it is delivered from the mouth and received through the ears. Mouths and ears can only handle input and output one unit at a time. ASL is three dimensional and depends on movement and the use of space. The hands and eyes do not conform to the same abilities and limitations as do mouths and ears.

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Adjectives come alive in ASL through the intensity and repetition of movement. Nouns are established in space and referred to as needed by pointing. In many ways, language is the communication of describing relationships (God is love, The book is on the table). ASL, because it is visual and uses space as the vehicle for description, is more exact and concise in communicating relationships than English which frequently is vague (He told them that what they wanted was over there).

A gentleman named Whorf hypothesized that the structure of a language had a tremendous impact on the way people using that language thought and behaved. This helps explain the cultural differences between nations. Imagine the difference in thinking a change in channel, such as from oral-aural to visual-manual, must have on a person. The structure of ASL complies with the requirements of a visual-manual channel of communication and is the most effective method of fostering cognitive development in youngsters. One almost is forced to ask whether it is possible to achieve native-like fluency in a language if one cannot receive it in the channel for which it was developed (Barnum, 1984).

2. Competency in a first language tremendously increases a person's ability to learn a second language (Cummins, 1980). Research in bilingual education unequivocally demonstrates that children proficient in any first language acquire the basic skills needed for developing fluency in a second language. Children are not taught first languages; they acquire them naturally through experience. Why then, do we insist on first "teaching" deaf children a second

language (English) through the use of an artificial system? The fear of educators seems to parallel the rationale used by proponents of oralism over the past century: If deaf children are allowed to use this native deaf language they won't desire, or be able, to develop their English skills. On the contrary, I suggest proficiency in American Sign Language will only serve the deaf student in his or her ability to acquire competency in English.

3. Deaf children have not been able to compete academically with their hearing, English speaking peers (Furth, 1966). I suppose there might be people who believe that there is something inherent in the disability of deafness that prohibits acquiring such skills because only 10% of deaf adults are English literate and the average deaf high school graduate has about a fifth grade reading and writing ability. Wouldn't it be a surprise, though, if it was the instructional methods that were to blame and not the children?

4. Deaf children of deaf parents perform better academically than deaf children of hearing parents (Moore, 1978). You might think that if a deaf child had hearing English speaking parents then naturally the child would develop better literacy skills than a child whose parents had fifth grade English skills. But, it's not the case. A large number of research studies have repeatedly demonstrated that deaf children of deaf parents outperform deaf children of hearing parents in practically all academic areas. The reason: consistent input from parents in a native language (Strong, 1986).

5. About 90% percent of deaf adults marry other deaf adults (Fay, 1898; Rainer, 1963). Why do you suppose that is? I suggest it is because communication is one of the most important necessities of human life. It is what distinguishes us from other members of the animal kingdom. Over 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents and siblings, yet only about 10% of them marry into the hearing world. The power of the need for comfortable, comprehensible communication is overwhelming. Deaf adults attract one another because it is easy for them to communicate. I have yet to see two married deaf adults sitting around engaged in conversation using SEE, or any other contrived sign system.

6. Artificial sign systems currently used deny deaf children the opportunity to create and experiment with language naturally. Trying to fit an oral-aural language into a visual-manual modality overwhelms the linguistically underdeveloped mind. Because English is linear and the units, or parts of linguistic information, are abundant, the mind is overwhelmed with the amount of input required to duplicate exact English. Emotionally, cognitively, and kinesthetically the child is frustrated; creativity and experimentation become too great a task. Appropriate use of the English language is a rarity; a fact that is pointed out to them constantly. An artificial sign system is not of high enough quality to aid cognitive/academic language proficiency because it does not represent a complete language system in itself to the deaf child. (Strong, 1986).

7. The use of simultaneous communication (such as SEE 2 and spoken English) in the classroom does not mean that deaf students are receiving "exact" English. In the education of deaf children there appears to be a basic assumption that because teachers use Signing Exact English and spoken English simultaneously the students therefore see and understand "exact" English. Research has demonstrated that this is not the case. Researchers, by videotaping teachers in the classroom and then comparing spoken English output and signed English output, found that only about 10% of utterances are signed exactly as they were spoken (Marmor and Petitto, 1979). Furthermore, the 10% signed in "exact" English were simple expressions without complex grammatical elements such as plurals, past tense, and compound sentences. It is a fallacy to believe that using simultaneous communication communicates exact English to a deaf child. There are several reasons why simultaneous communication is not an appropriate communication system for deaf children in the classroom. First, it physically takes more time to manually produce signs than to utter a spoken word. For example, try to simultaneously sign and say "unhappiness". Second, the student is overwhelmed by trying to understand an oral-aural language in a visual-manual channel. The amount of signs required to duplicate "exact" English far exceeds the amount normally produced in a natural visual-manual sign language. Third, deaf students receiving simultaneous communication tend to depend on the signing and pay minimal attention to the spoken message. Given that only 10% of "exact" English is represented manually during simultaneous communication and given that

students are depending on the signing more so than the spoken output, to what extent can we expect deaf students to acquire competent English skills? Fourth, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to sign and speak simultaneously with "exact" accuracy. There may be educators who advocate that communicating a percentage of "exact" English, even as little as 10%, is preferable to communicating 0%. However, knowing that the literacy level of deaf children has not significantly improved over the past few decades might it not be reasonable to consider new approaches and strategies in teaching?

8. Without exposure to ASL, deaf students still develop ASL-like habits. Recent research is showing evidence that despite consistent English input from their teachers, deaf children develop and use some of the linguistic elements of ASL on a regular basis (Strong, 1986). Supalla studied the signing habits of deaf elementary school children in a total communication program in which SEE 2 was the chosen sign system. All students had hearing parents. He found that use of classifiers, indexing, negation, and non-verbal behaviors (components of ASL grammar) were used regularly. He also discovered that teachers rarely, if ever, used these same ASL markers. Conversely, he noted that use of SEE 2 codes for tense, verb inflections, plurals, etc. were used ten times as frequently by teachers as by students. The structure and grammar of ASL is so natural to the visual-manual channel of communication that deaf children exposed only to the fundamentals of English-like sign systems automatically develop ASL-like habits.

9. **ASL is a natural language.** In a country and an era in which human rights, social justice, and equal opportunity are paramount on the social agenda, it is surprising that deaf children have been denied the opportunity to learn their native language. ASL evolved just as any spoken language evolved: over time by people sharing the same geography, culture, and experiences. Artificial sign systems are designed by a small group of people (mostly hearing) over a short period of time without consultation or approval of the constituency expected to adopt it. Respect for deaf people is reason enough for allowing children to learn ASL.

10. **Culture and language are inseparable.** There is, without argument, a viable, rich, and unique Deaf culture. Not all people with hearing impairments are members of it; nevertheless, for those who chose to participate there exists a community and culture of deaf people for which ASL is the axle, the mortar that binds them together in brotherhood. Denying access to ASL is denying Deaf culture; denying one his or her own culture is oppression. Deaf children have a right, and thus educators have an obligation, to allow ASL into the curricula of hearing impaired programs in the United States.

For fear of being misunderstood, let me emphasize I am not opposed to the use of an artificial sign system, such as SEE 2, for the instruction of English or other academic subjects. I am opposed to artificial sign systems being taught as the primary language system while simultaneously depriving exposure to American Sign

Language. We live in a hearing, English speaking environment. English literacy is a desirable quality and artificial sign systems can assist deaf students in acquiring English literacy; however, an artificial sign system will never replace a native sign system for the purpose of communication. I am opposed to curricula that are obsessed with English and give little meaningful attention to the development of "thinking skills". I am opposed to educational programs that deny people access to their native language. I am opposed to the nationwide implementation of a (simultaneous) communication philosophy that is unresearched, unproven, and to date, unsuccessful. I am in support of a manual signed English system that allows parents to communicate with their deaf children in the parent's native language and assists deaf students in developing English skills. I am in support of a total communication philosophy if it includes instruction of, and in, American Sign Language.

There are many reasons we are a decade or more away from seeing a bilingual/bicultural approach to the education of deaf children: chew on these while you wait.

1. Ninety percent or more of educators of the deaf are hearing, many of whom do not recognize or accept ASL as a formidable and complete language.

2. Deaf people comprise a component of a larger oppressed minority: the disabled community. Traditionally, disabled groups are considered in need of rehabilitation to be provided by able-bodied

professionals. To allow ASL, and thus deaf people, into the center of deaf education would be contradictory to the rehabilitation and special education professions manners.

3. There exists among educators and parents the unsubstantiated fear that if deaf children are allowed to learn at an early age about their heritage, culture, and language the children will forever be lost into the bowels of the "deaf world."

4. "If the Hearing educational establishment were to recognize the Deaf community as a legitimate minority group, they would soon be forced to admit they know nothing about the structure of the group and that Deaf people could probably help themselves a lot better than Hearing people can" (Woodward, 1982).

5. Teacher preparation programs do not require fluency in ASL; therefore, the entire postsecondary system of educating teachers of the deaf must be confronted and changed.

6. Parents, upon discovering the deafness of their children, are not adequately exposed to appropriate and comprehensive information concerning the linguistic and cultural implications of a severe hearing loss.

7. As deaf people are systematically discriminated against in educational employment opportunities, they will need to depend on empathetic hearing advocates to help further their cause.

Those wishing to further understand the reasons for integrating ASL into the education of deaf children are referred to Harlan Lane's profound work When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf. If you have a deaf child, know a deaf person, intend to, or in fact do work with deaf people --- you owe it to yourself to read this book.

The history of deaf education has been preoccupied with the student's ears, mouth, and mastery of English. Perhaps, the time has come to attend to reasoning, thinking, creativity, and language development in general. Currently, English is being taught by the use of English which is the very subject the students are trying to learn. Students need fluency in a natural visual-manual language before they will be able to grasp the complexities of a oral-aural language.

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